

2004

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Maggie Penkert

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Recommended Citation

Penkert, Maggie (2004) "Radical Self: Greenpeace and Eart First! Identify in the 1980s," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 9 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol9/iss1/10>

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Radical Self: Greenpeace and Earth First! Identity in the 1980s

Maggie Penkert

The images of women and men in tie-dye gathering at outdoor rallies, climbing trees about to be cut down, or moving their rafts in front of whaling harpoons are familiar after three decades of environmental activists gaining headlines with their extreme earth-saving efforts. Since the 1970s there has been a new radicalism within environmentalism that has taken beliefs about nature and actions to save it beyond previously recognized environmental protection measures. While the radicals created divisions in the larger movement between themselves and “mainstream” environmentalists, they had divisions of their own as well, based on the degree of the groups’ radicalism.¹ Greenpeace and Earth First! are two groups that, during the 1980s, demonstrated these differences.

A difference in the extreme ideologies between Greenpeace and Earth First! led to some differences in their actions, which prompts the question, why did the groups’ basic ideologies differ? One explanation is that Earth First! was more ideologically and actively radical than Greenpeace because of a difference in the self-identities of their members. Generally Earth First!ers identified themselves as insignificant, while Greenpeace members generally identified themselves as significant in the grand order of life. Essentially, the self-perceived modesty of Earth First!ers pushed them to radical limits that Greenpeace members, with their self-perceived importance, fell short of achieving.

The differences that separated groups on the scale of radicalism, like Earth First! and Greenpeace, have been the focus of

¹Peter List, *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, Inc., 1993), 5.

studies that described such differences and that explored how dissatisfaction within environmentalism prompted new radical groups.² Two areas of scholarship have developed about humanity's place in relation to nature from a psychological perspective and an ecological perspective – ecopsychology and deep ecology. Ecopsychology, a field of study that developed in the 1960s, believed that humans' psychological health depended on their connection with nature.³ Expanding on this principle, ecopsychologists believed that humans needed to recognize themselves as members of nature and not as dominant over nature.⁴

Deep ecology also recognized the importance of humans' roles within nature.⁵ Deep ecology was a philosophy, a movement, and a way of life that gave nature its own intrinsic value, while discarding the idea of nature's worth determined by its usefulness to humans.⁶ Based on an understanding that humans are simply one element in the natural order, deep ecology demanded that people live with the least possible negative impact on the environment.⁷

²Mark Stoll, "Green Versus Green: Religion, Ethics, and the Bookchin-Foreman Dispute," *Environmental History* 6 (2001): 413-414; Jonathan K. London, "Common Roots and Entangled Limbs: Earth First! and the Growth of Post-Wilderness Environmentalism on California's North Coast," *Antipode* 30 (1998): 155-156, 159-160.

³Andy Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3; Melissa Nelson, "A Psychological Impact Report for the Environmental Movement," *ReVision* 20 (1998): 37.

⁴Fisher, 5.

⁵Phillip F. Cramer, *Deep Environmental Politics: The Role of Radical Environmentalism in Crafting American Environmental Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 3.

⁶Cramer, 5-7.

⁷Bill Devall, "Deep Ecology and Radical Environmentalism," in *American Environmentalism: The U.S. Environmental Movement, 1970-1990*, ed. Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 52-53.

What has not received much attention, even taking into account scholarship in the fields of ecopsychology and deep ecology, is the relation of the activists' personal identities to the extent of their radicalism. If human psychology in general is related to nature, that logic can be taken a step further and applied to individuals – human self-identity is related to nature. One's understanding of one's place within nature determines how one will interact with (or on behalf of) nature. The differing identities of the environmental activists provided personal ideological boundaries for environmentalism and tactical boundaries for individual actions. Greenpeace and Earth First! members had slightly different personal identities that determined their ideologies and tactics, which were in turn different in some ways. However, before discussing the two groups' ideologies and tactics any further, some background to their creation and structure is necessary for a basic understanding of each group.

Some Canadian and American environmental and peace activists created Greenpeace in 1970, to protest the United States' testing of nuclear weapons in the Aleutian Islands by sailing to the area, in hopes that their physical presence would deter the detonations.⁸ Unsuccessful in their first attempt to stop the nuclear testing in the Aleutians, the group persevered. Although Greenpeace started mainly as an anti-nuclear movement, the group soon expanded its focus to environmental issues in general.⁹ Although in size and budget Greenpeace is now considered a huge organization, it has kept its founding spirit of localized protests alive.¹⁰

⁸"The Founders of Greenpeace," n.d., <<http://www.greenpeace.org.au/aboutus/founders.html>> (1 May 2003).

⁹Paul Wapner, "In Defense of Banner Hangers: The Dark Green Politics of Greenpeace," in *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*, ed. Bron Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 305.

¹⁰Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 32.

In the case of Greenpeace, a specific action gave birth to the group. However, in the case of Earth First!, it was a few people's ideals about the direction of environmentalism, as opposed to a single event, that started the group. The basic story of Earth First!'s founding is that five friends dissatisfied with the effectiveness of contemporary environmental groups (Greenpeace included), and frustrated with recent governmental lack of protection for wilderness, decided to start a group that would not compromise on environmental issues.¹¹ One of Earth First!'s founders, Dave Foreman, expressed his idea for the group to create a space within the environmental movement, and specifically within the radical branch, that had never before existed. In an article published in 1981, Foreman said, "It was time for a new joker in the deck: a militant, uncompromising group unafraid to say what needed to be said or to back it up with stronger actions than the established organizations were willing to take."¹² Earth First!, as the founding members saw it, was self-consciously anti-organizational. As co-founder Foreman said regarding the organization-phobia of the group, "We felt that if we took on the organization of the industrial state, we would soon accept their anthropocentric paradigm."¹³ Instead of an organizational hierarchy, Earth First! consisted of a central group of thirteen women and men throughout the United States who served as the group's only kind of leadership. While people in these informal positions helped to keep the Earth First!

¹¹Martha Lee, "Environmental Apocalypse: Millennial Ideology of Earth First!" in *Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 121.

¹²Dave Foreman, "Earth First!," *Progressive*, October 1981, 40.

¹³Foreman, *Progressive*, 42.

movement alive in at least a vague coherence, the group's soul lay in individual motivation prompting action.¹⁴

The self-identities of Greenpeace and Earth First! members influencing the degree of radicalism in their respective movements is more evident in the basic ideologies of each group than in the groups' creations and structures. As radical environmental groups, Greenpeace and Earth First! had important ideological similarities. However, just as the self-identities of the members differed slightly, so too did the ideologies. Greenpeace philosophy focused on the human responsibility for environmental destruction, education as a step towards more eco-friendly practices, and saving nature for future generations of humans. Earth First! shared the belief that humans were responsible for the degradation, but they were very pessimistic about the ability of humans to change, and they focused on saving nature not for their descendants, but for nature alone. These differences in ideology between the two groups are a result of differences in the self-identities of the members (the significance of Greenpeacers versus the insignificance of Earth First!ers).

Greenpeace believed that humans were responsible for environmental destruction because of their greed and ignorance of the repercussions of their actions. Greenpeace therefore also believed that if it could create an awareness of the (sometimes indirect) consequences of human actions on the environment, this transformation in public consciousness would be an essential step toward ending environmental destruction.¹⁵ Paul Wapner, who has written many articles about Greenpeace, summarized the group's environmental protection goals, "At the most general level then, the first step toward protecting the earth is to change the way vast

¹⁴Marilyn M. Cooper, "Environmental Rhetoric in the Age of Hegemonic Politics: Earth First! and the Nature Conservancy," in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, ed. Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 252-253.

¹⁵Wapner, 307.

numbers of people understand it.”¹⁶ Greenpeace also conceived of its role as a group of environmental defenders that would help the environment through its members’ direct actions. This was evident in their mission statement from 1992, “Greenpeace will both personally bear witness to atrocities against life and take direct action to prevent them.”¹⁷ Greenpeace members believed that they held the power within themselves to fight environmental destruction successfully because they knew the specifics of its occurrences (bearing witness), which suggests a self-identity of strength and importance.

In 1976, Greenpeace published its “Declaration of Interdependence,” which explained that although it supported the ecocentric view of deep ecology in which nature has an intrinsic value, the group also acknowledged that its efforts in saving nature was for human benefit – namely, to prevent the human species’ extinction. The Declaration stated that while nature must be saved for its own sake, action must be taken to preserve nature “or our children will be denied their future.”¹⁸ In the “Declaration of Interdependence,” the self-identity of Greenpeace members was evidently significant because of the extent to which human welfare was as important to maintain as environmental protection. Also, for people to see themselves as caretakers with such an essential responsibility as maintaining the natural balance of life, they would have to conceive of themselves individually as significant beings.

The general ideology of Earth First! argued that the inevitable seeds of nature’s destruction lay in the modern forms of industrial western civilization. The general anthropocentric views of these societies placed more value on humans than other forms of life,

¹⁶Wapner, 306.

¹⁷Ronald G. Shaiko, “Greenpeace USA: Something Old, New, Borrowed,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (1993): 92.

¹⁸“Declaration of Interdependence, 1976,” in *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics*, ed. Peter List (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, Inc., 1993), 134-136.

which Earth First! regarded as the reason humans allowed widespread destruction of nature to take place.¹⁹ Earth First! found another source of environmental harm in the combination of this dangerous anthropocentric world-view with the destructive potential of modern technological practices exploiting natural resources.²⁰ Earth First! ideology focused on all the negative elements of human society that led to environmental destruction and believed that humanity in general lacked the capacity to live in harmony with the environment. In placing such limits on the human character, Earth First!ers self-identities, as members of this handicapped humankind, could not have been very positive.

Earth First! members saw their group's role as taking part in direct actions that halted environmental destruction in any form, for however short a time. With their no-compromise stance, they did not necessarily believe that they could win every time, but their goal was to not back down from any fight for the environment. Foreman expressed this unwillingness to concede in an article, when he wrote, "Perhaps it is a hopeless quest. But is that relevant? Is that important? No, what is important is that one who loves Earth can do no less."²¹ In this excerpt from Foreman's writings, he seemed to believe in the probable ineffectiveness of humans to really achieve protection for wilderness on the scale that was needed. In this view, humans, Earth First! members included, did not necessarily have the power to save their world.

In addition to direct actions on behalf of protecting nature, Earth First! saw salvation for nature in the end of civilization as they knew it. They advocated a return to more primitive lifestyle, in which there was little technology, no capitalism, and no government other than the social structures provided by tribal

¹⁹Lee, 125; Ken Kassman, *Envisioning Ecotopia: The U.S. Green Movement and the Politics of Radical Social Change* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 23.

²⁰Lee, 122.

²¹Foreman, *Progressive*, 42.

systems of living.²² This belief, referred to as Neo-Primitivism, established the idea that “civilized” humanity, in the western understanding of the term, was incapable of living in harmony with the environment.²³ Earth First!ers’ belief that the primitive lifestyle, modeled after indigenous tribes of people around the world, could be human and nature’s saving grace, shows that they had faith in at least small groups of humans. However, Earth First!ers considered that the possibility that humans would destroy the earth and bring about their own demise was more likely than transforming human civilization. This pessimistic view of people included a lack of faith in themselves, to a degree, because they had no confidence in their own abilities to aid in human society’s necessary transformations.

In the collective Earth First! ideology, there is also an emphasis on nature-based spirituality as a component of the return to the primitive lifestyle. Nature-based spirituality is important to Earth First! ideology in two ways – it affirms the need for humans to maintain a deep (emotional, spiritual) bond with the earth in all of its natural forms, and it opposes the monotheistic religions that were seen as a source of civilization’s evils.²⁴ The monotheistic religious traditions, from the Earth First! point of view, were dangerous to the environment because their faiths were partially based on the anthropocentric belief that God created the earth for humans to use.²⁵ In contrast, nature-based spirituality believes in human existence as equal in importance to all life forms. When people’s spiritual faith, which is essentially personal views on the universal order, denies that they have a “chosen” role over other

²²Kassman, 52-53.

²³Kassman, 22-23.

²⁴Bron Taylor, *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 16.

²⁵Taylor, *Ecological Resistance Movements*, 16.

living things, their senses of self-identity would probably include a sense of personal insignificance.

As ideologies justify actions, the tactics of Greenpeace and Earth First! expanded upon their guiding principles. Greenpeace and Earth First! qualified for radicalism due to their extreme tactics, in addition to their ecocentric ideologies. Both groups were unique in that they were the first to add direct actions to the environmental movement. Greenpeace direct actions had the dual goals of gaining attention to educate people and attempting to stop ecological destruction. Earth First!'s direct actions, on the other hand, had the main goal of halting environmentally damaging acts, even if only temporarily. Other differences, which made Earth First! the more radical of the two groups, were the ultimate objects of their efforts (as generally either animals or non-animals) and their policies on the use of violence.

As the first of the two groups, early Greenpeace actions established a new direction for the environmental movement by using direct actions, physically placing themselves in danger as a form of protest to stop environmentally destructive activities.²⁶ By the early 1980s, Greenpeace had established three major campaign categories as the focus of their efforts – nuclear disarmament, endangered wildlife, and toxic waste pollution.²⁷ The anti-nuclear campaign, in addition to their first direct action, included other trips to weapons test sites and illegally posting radioactive warning signs along highways to protest nuclear shipments.²⁸ The campaign for protecting endangered species was mostly focused on ending whaling and the killing of baby seals for their fur. In most cases, the activists would place themselves between whales and

²⁶Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago: Nobic Press, 1990), 47-48.

²⁷Robin Toner, "A Gadfly for Environmental Causes," *New York Times*, 25 September 1985, sec. A.

²⁸"Fake Signs Annoy Four States," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 October 1981.

whaling ships, or between hunters and seals.²⁹ In each of the three campaign areas, Greenpeace direct actions are examples of the new forms of protest that they initiated into the environmentalist repertoire. They took the movement's earlier tactics of working through legal and governmental channels a step further by using their own bodies in protest to actually stop, for however short a time, the practices that harmed the environment. The focus of most Greenpeace campaigns and direct actions was on either the survival of their fellow humans or the survival of other mammals. While they believed in the intrinsic value of nature, their actions suggested a sense of hierarchy in choosing what nature to protect. Mammals (humans included) seemed to be at the top of their order, suggesting a sense of self as relatively significant.

Greenpeace tactics often included the extreme decisions of members to put their own lives at risk (of either legal punishment or physical harm) in pursuit of environmental protection. However, Greenpeace leadership drew a definite line between what they viewed as acceptable and unacceptable direct actions, and that line excluded violence of any kind. Direct actions in the environmental movement that used violence, whether perpetrated on humans or inanimate objects, was referred to as ecotage (or environmental sabotage). This form of protest developed in the 1970s, and while rarely planned against humans, sabotage of machinery and other equipment had the potential side effect of harming people.³⁰ Greenpeace officially took a firm stance against ecotage of any kind, predicated upon the belief that violence towards humans, even in the very indirect form of violence against their tools for living and working, was unacceptable.³¹

²⁹Bob Hunter, "Taking on the Goliaths of Doom," in *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics*, ed. Peter List (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, Inc., 1998), 140.

³⁰List, 4-5.

³¹Shaiko, 98; Scarce, 54.

Earth First! tactics were different from Greenpeace tactics because the focus of most Earth First! direct actions focused on wilderness.³² While the survival and welfare of animal species was an aspect of their battles, Earth First!ers were usually more devoted to the protection of natural land than anything. Habitats were so important that members were willing to risk their lives for non-animals and even non-living things, such as the natural flow of rivers. Earth First! direct actions along these lines included chaining themselves to machinery used in logging and in building roads or similar development projects. Earth First!ers also attempted to halt logging by chaining themselves to or climbing up the trees that were to be cut down.³³

Earth First! attempted to increase eco-awareness, although it pessimistically viewed the ability of education to address environmental problems adequately. They used their direct actions, traveling road shows, and various works of guerilla theater to attract attention to their cause.³⁴ Guerilla theater, which relied on zany Earth First! humor, involved activists dressing up as animals whose habitats were threatened and then interacting with the general public on the animals' behalf. One example of Earth First! guerilla theater occurred at Yellowstone National Park in 1985, when a group of Earth First!ers dressed up in bear costumes and entered a hotel and a restaurant, asking for rooms to stay in and food because their natural areas of habitat were being reduced by development and tourism.³⁵ This kind of humor was continually

³²Howie Wolke, "Earth First!'s Proper Role,"(1982) in *The Earth First! Reader: Ten Years of Radical Environmentalism*, ed. John Davis (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991), 247.

³³DeLuca, 6.

³⁴Michael Parfit, "Earth First!ers Wield a Mean Monkey Wrench," *Smithsonian* 21 (1990): 192.

³⁵Iver Peterson, "Conservation and Tourist Interests at Odds in Dispute at Yellowstone," *New York Times*, 5 August 1985, sec. A; Bill Soiffer, "Guerillas in the War Over the Environment," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 October 1985.

a part of Earth First! direct actions as they bordered on making fun of themselves. Foreman's emphasis on the importance of humor to the movement suggests that Earth First!ers were always careful never to take themselves too seriously. In an article about Earth First!'s goals, co-founder Foreman said, "Not only does humor preserve individual and group sanity, it retards hubris, the major cause of environmental rape, and it is also an effective weapon."³⁶ This tendency to take oneself lightly suggests an identity that did not regard the self as very significant, and in fact, also views the feeling of self-importance as dangerous.

The other major element of direct actions that separated Earth First! from Greenpeace was its acceptance of ecotage as a legitimate practice in environmental protection. Earth First! did not indiscriminately support all forms of ecotage, but the founding members, especially Foreman, believed in it as a powerful tool when used appropriately. For Greenpeace, non-violence was part of their overall strategy – each action was planned to be non-violent, whereas for Earth First!, non-violence was a tactic – only to be employed when it was more beneficial than violent methods.³⁷ Specific examples of Earth First! ecotage included illegally pulling up survey stakes, pouring foreign substances into the gas tanks of mobile machinery, and tree-spiking.³⁸ Foreman, because of his regard for ecotage (which he referred to as "monkeywrenching"), wrote guidelines for its use, simultaneously to endorse it as potentially effective and warn of the dangers if not carefully implemented. Foreman did not label ecotage as violence, because it was only supposed to be directed at inanimate objects.³⁹

³⁶Dave Foreman, "Earth First!," in *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics*, ed. Peter List (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, Inc., 1993), 189.

³⁷Scarce, 54.

³⁸James Coates, "Earth First! Throws Monkey Wrench into Exploitation of Wilds," *San Francisco Examiner* 25 August 1985, sec. A.

³⁹Dave Foreman, "Strategic Monkeywrenching," in *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics*, ed. Peter List (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, Inc., 1993), 192-195.

Earth First!'s decision to use ecotage as a tactic illustrates that they were prepared to engage themselves in the fight to oppose environmental destruction to a greater degree than Greenpeace members. In their acceptance of violence as a viable method, they further placed the welfare of nature above their own. Their willingness to commit violence for the sake of wilderness in its non-animal forms suggests once again that their lack of concern for the human species reflected a personal identity as insignificant in the natural world.

In the founding, ideologies, and tactics of Greenpeace and Earth First! can be found numerous examples of how self-identity of the two groups' members was important to the levels of radicalism that they undertook. The examples support the possibility that Greenpeace members' general self-identities were ones of significance in the world order, but that Earth First! members general self-identities were ones of insignificance. Assuming that human thought and action is related to a sense of self, which psychological studies support, the self-identities of environmental activists helped to determine their ideologies and the tactics that they employed for their movements.⁴⁰ Greenpeace members had self-identities of importance in the natural order, so Greenpeace ideology gave humans an important role in nature. Earth First! members had self-identities that viewed themselves as rather unnecessary in the natural order, so Earth First! ideology believed that humans were essentially unnecessary. Therefore, differences between the self-identities of Greenpeace members and Earth First! members were manifested in the differences between their ideologies and actions. At the root of Greenpeace's and Earth First!'s levels of radicalism for the environmental movement was the personal identities of their activists.

⁴⁰Karl Aquino and Americus Reed II, "The Self-Importance of Moral Identity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83 (2002): 4-7.